

**Just a Smack at Auden**  
**Seminar 1, 2024-25**  
**T. J. Clark**

Bruegel's paintings have inspired many poems. It is not surprising that in last year's Seminar 3, 'About Bruegel They Were Never Wrong', too many poems in my handout went unread. **Hunters in the Snow**, and the poems of Walter de la Mare, William Carlos Williams and John Berryman occupied most of the hour and a half. This time I'd like to begin with **Landscape with the Fall of Icarus** – the painting first, and then W. H. Auden's, Williams' and Michael Hamburger's poems about it. (I've included two other Icarus poems, by Anne Sexton and Gareth Owen). From Icarus I hope we can move to Williams' poem titled 'Haymaking', and the paintings it may have in mind. I ask you to read also Williams' 'The Adoration of the Magi', which is beautiful, and illuminates some of the assertions in 'Haymaking'. Lastly, a poem by the American poet Norman Dubie, 'February: The Boy Bruegel'. Both 'Haymaking' and 'February: The Boy Bruegel' seem to me to invite comparison with Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts'.

**Musée des Beaux Arts**

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The Old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position; how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking  
dully along;  
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
On a pond at the edge of the wood:  
They never forgot  
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the plowman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

--W. H. Auden

### Landscape with the Fall of Icarus

According to Brueghel  
when Icarus fell  
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing  
his field  
the whole pageantry

of the year was  
awake tingling  
near

the edge of the sea  
concerned  
with itself

sweating in the sun  
that melted  
the wings' wax

unsignificantly  
off the coast  
there was

a splash quite unnoticed  
this was  
Icarus drowning

--William Carlos Williams

### Lines on Brueghel's 'Icarus'

The ploughman ploughs, the fisherman dreams of fish;  
Aloft, the sailor, through a world of ropes  
Guides tangled meditations, feverish  
With memories of girls forsaken, hopes  
Of brief reunions, new discoveries,  
Past rum consumed, rum promised, rum potential.  
Sheep crop the grass, lift up their heads and gaze  
Into a sheepish present: the essential,  
Illimitable juiciness of things,  
Greens, yellows, browns are what they see.  
Churlish and slow, the shepherd, hearing wings –  
Perhaps an eagle's – gapes uncertainly;  
Too late. The worst has happened: lost to man,  
The angel, Icarus, for ever failed,  
Fallen with melted wings when, near the sun  
He scorned the ordering planet, which prevailed  
And, jeering, now slinks off, to rise once more.  
But he – his damaged purpose drags him down –  
Too far from his half-brothers on the shore,  
Hardly conceivable, is left to drown.

--Michael Hamburger

### To A Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph

Consider Icarus, pasting those sticky wings on,  
 testing that strange little tug at his shoulder blade,  
 and think of that first flawless moment over the lawn  
 of the labyrinth. Think of the difference it made!  
 There below are the trees, as awkward as camels;  
 and here are the shocked starlings pumping past  
 and think of innocent Icarus who is doing quite well.  
 Larger than a sail, over the fog and the blast  
 of the plushy ocean, he goes. Admire his wings!  
 Feel the fire at his neck and see how casually  
 he glances up and is caught, wondrously tunneling  
 into that hot eye. Who cares that he fell back to the sea?  
 See him acclaiming the sun and come plunging down  
 while his sensible daddy goes straight into town.

--Anne Sexton

### Icarus by Mobile

Daddy, Daddy, is that you?  
 Listen I don't have much time OK.  
 But I wanted to say, right  
 It's back to the drawing board Daddy  
 The whole contraption is a no no.  
 The wings?  
 No, the wings worked fine  
 Couldn't fault the wings in any way  
 The wings were ace  
 And your calculations on the stresses  
 Re wind and feathers  
 Spot on!  
 Likewise the pinion tolerances  
 And remember that flap factor  
 That gave us such sleepless nights  
 Let me tell you  
 Those flaps worked like a dream.  
 But Daddy  
 Oh Daddy  
 How could you forget the sun!  
 I don't have much time  
 So listen OK  
 We're talking equations here  
 Just let me spell it out for you:  
 Solar heat + bees wax + ambition =  
 Total Meltdown and I mean total  
 Which equals, to put it simply  
 Your boy Icarus is on collision course  
 With something called Earth.  
 Daddy I don't have much time  
 Let me give the coordinates  
 For the pick-up

OK stretch of headland and a bay  
 Visibility good, outlook calm  
 And hey  
 Am I lucky  
 Or am I lucky!  
 There's a galleon anchored near the shore  
 Looks like Icarus  
 Is in for an early pick up this fine morning.  
 And over there some poor old farmer's  
 Ploughing through a field of stones  
 And here's an old boy with a fishing pole and  
 Listen Daddy  
 Would you believe  
 Some guy just out of frame  
 Is painting the whole thing.  
 And now I'm waving Daddy, waving  
 Any minute now they'll look up and  
 So listen Daddy I don't have much time  
 I'm going to start screaming soon OK.  
 Can you still hear me?  
 I don't have much  
 Daddy, I just wanted to ask  
 You know  
 About my mum  
 Was she  
 Listen Daddy  
 I don't have much time  
 I

--Gareth Owen

### Haymaking

The living quality of  
 the man's mind  
 stands out  
  
 and its covert assertions  
 for art, art, art!  
 painting  
  
 that the Renaissance  
 tried to absorb  
 but  
  
 it remained a wheat field  
 over which the  
 wind played  
  
 men with scythes tumbling  
 the wheat in  
 rows  
  
 the gleaners already busy  
 it was his own –  
 magpies  
  
 the patient horses no one  
 could take that  
 from him

--William Carlos Williams

### The Adoration of the Kings

From the Nativity  
which I have already celebrated  
the Babe in its Mother's arms

the Wise Men in their stolen  
splendor  
and Joseph and the soldiery

attendant  
with their incredulous faces  
make a scene copied we'll say

from the Italian masters  
but with a difference  
the mastery

of the painting  
and the mind the resourceful mind  
that governed the whole

the alert mind dissatisfied with  
what it is asked to do  
and cannot do

accepted the story and painted  
it in the brilliant  
colors of the chronicler  
the downcast eyes of the Virgin  
as a work of art  
for profound worship

--William Carlos Williams

### February: The Boy Breughel

The birches stand in their beggar's row:  
Each poor tree  
Has had its wrists nearly  
Torn from the clear sleeves of bone,  
These icy trees  
Are hanging by their thumbs  
Under a sun  
That will begin to heal them soon,  
Each will climb out  
Of its own blue, oval mouth;  
The river groans,  
Two birds call out from the woods

And a fox crosses through snow  
Down a hill; then, he runs,  
He has overcome something white  
Beside a white bush, he shakes  
It twice, and as he turns  
For the woods, the blood in the snow

Looks like the red fox,  
At a distance, running down the hill:  
A white rabbit in his mouth killed  
By the fox in snow  
Is killed over and over as just  
Two colors, now, on a winter hill:

Two colors! Red and white. A barber's bowl!  
Two colors like the peppers  
In the windows  
Of the town below the hill. Smoke comes  
From the chimneys. Everything is still.

Ice in the river begins to move,  
And a boy in a red shirt who woke  
A moment ago  
Watches from his window  
The street where an ox  
Who's broken out of his hut  
Stands in the fresh snow  
Staring cross-eyed at the boy  
Who smiles and looks out  
Across the roof to the hill;  
And the sun is reaching down  
Into the woods

Where the smoky red fox still  
Eats his kill. Two colors.  
Just two colors!  
A sunrise. The snow.

--Norman Dubie